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"Listen. If something goes wrong, here's what you should do. First, run to the escape pod. Second, ignore anything I tell you to do during the emergency."

Kafka looked at the Human incredulously. He raised his curiosity wing from under his exoskeleton and replied in a chittery voice, "How do you mean, Miss Silver? You are the Captain of this ship, you say I should not listen to you in emergencies?" Kafka knew that humans could be illogical at times, but he didn't expect to be faced with such a contradiction on his first day working on an interstellar freighter.

Silver crossed her arms. "That's right. You've never been out of your home system, right, Kafka?" He began to raise his affirmation wing, but Silver continued before he could verbally confirm the fact. "Well, you should know that space pirates are very real, despite what the Trade Federation tells you." Silver paused and stared directly into Kafka's compound eyes. "And they're not at all like you see on the serials. You either give them the cargo, or they take it by force, usually along with your life."

The finality with which Silver finished her statement sent a chill down Kafka's exoskeleton. He had no doubt that she spoke from experience. Silver continued after a moment of tense silence.

"I value my crew's lives over my cargo, so my order is simple: If something goes wrong, be it space pirates or an engine overload, go to the escape pod immediately."

Kafka could only stand in contemplation. In an attempt to reply he let out an incoherent chitter, before steadying himself and replying, "But, Miss Silver, what if you refuse to come to the escape pod with the rest of us? Surely, you would not want us to leave you alone with the pirates?"

Silver replied without hesitation. "Leave me."

Kafka's face fell as he raised a wing of displeasure and cried out in protest, "But, Miss Silver, what if-", he tried to say, but she cut him off.

"Kafka, it won't be my first crisis on this ship, and it sure as hell won't be my last. All I want is for you and the rest of the crew to escape as soon as possible, and land at the nearest safe zone." She turned around and began to walk down the hall towards the cockpit.

"I'll be able to handle whatever fate decides to throw at me, so don't worry." she said before disappearing behind the door to the bridge.

He didn't know how to respond to that, so Kafka simply bowed out and left to his post. He never expected to have to act on Silver's order so soon.

Kafka was in the cargo bay mopping up the sand from yesterday's cargo loading. Silver had stopped on one of the many deserts of Zoten-3 to pick up some Promethium fuel shipments, and an errant sandstorm had gotten sand into every nook and cranny of the cavernous room's floor. As he mopped, Kafka took note of how empty the room was. The few dozen waist-high crates scattered around seemed like almost nothing compared to the rows he saw waiting for them at the platform back planetside. With his curiosity wing raised, he turned to Biv, a senior crewmember who was helping him clean.

"Biv, don't you remember there being more cargo than this? I'm sure there was way more than this back on Zoten-Three." The burly slug shifted one of his three eye-stalks at Kafka and replied through his digital translator, "I believe the storm swept away most of the cargo. Silver decided to cut losses and ship what remained."

Kafka raised his displeasure wing alongside his curiosity wing. He couldn't believe that any storm could have blown away the cargo; each of these boxes had to weigh at least two tons! It just didn't make sense. Kafka's rebuttal, however, was preempted by the ship's speakers crackling to life with Silver's voice. "All crew to bridge, all crew to bridge."

Kafka scuttled over to the bridge as fast as his four legs could take him. Biv, who had taken the lead ahead of Kafka, had told him that Silver didn't use the Intercom unless it was an emergency. "Is it pirates this time? Or did something go wrong with atmospherics..." he mumbled worriedly to himself. He arrived at the bridge with a thousand thoughts of what could have gone wrong, and still found himself dreadfully surprised when he saw the threat on the bridge's central monitor. An unidentified vessel was drifting towards them. "It's pirates. *Pirates*. Why did my first emergency have to be pirates, couldn't it have been a viggard infestation, or something? At least those won't kill you..."

Kafka's nervous muttering was interrupted by the arrival of more people to the bridge. It seemed that he and Biv had gotten there first, which meant that each of the two dozen other crew members gave him strange looks as they passed by his position next to the bridge door. Silver arrived last — she had evidently been working on the ship elsewhere. "Probably a fault in one of the doors, she's all covered in oil." Kafka thought to himself.

He didn't have time to speculate any further, though, as Silver had begun to speak. "Our ship has received a transmission from the unidentified craft you see on the screen. They demand the surrender of all our material goods. Everyone, go get your personal valuables onto the escape pod." Her speech was curt and uninspiring, but everyone present hustled out of the room

with a fervor that seemed to indicate otherwise. Kafka was swept up in the rush of people headed towards their quarters before he could even raise a wing.

As they packed, Biv must have noticed Kafka's displeasure wing raised to its fullest, because he placed a single feeler onto Kafka's shoulder as they packed. "Do not worry, Kafka. Silver knows what she is doing", Biv assured him. Kafka didn't lower his displeasure wing any, but he did spare a glance at the rest of the crew as everyone packed what little they had into travel-cases.

"How is everyone so calm? We're being attacked, aren't we?" Kafka anxiously whispered back to Biv.

"Yes, but it is fine. We are close to a Federation Star-Station, the escape pod will take us that far." Biv replied nonchalantly to Kafka, who was now shaking his wing anxiously.

"Come, we should go to the pod now. We don't have much time." Biv continued to reassure Kafka until they were both secured in the pod.

Kafka sat in his harness fidgeting. They hadn't taken off yet, which made him nervous. He heard a grunt from Biv, who was being repeatedly slapped by Kafka's displeasure wing, which was now bobbing around as fast as it could. Kafka stammered out an apology and made a conscious effort to stop his wing as he inspected the pod from his seat. "It's so small..." he remarked quietly to himself. This escape pod was clearly not built to legal standards - the wall panels seemed to be ready to fall off their scaffolding, and the pod's seats were so cramped that the pilot had several of the passenger's legs dangling between him and the console.

Before his thoughts could wander, Kafka was interrupted by the low hum of an ancient monitor coming to life next to the pod's entry hatch. He and the rest of the crew craned their heads towards the screen, which was tuned to the ship's security camera frequency.

Kafka sat with bated breath, watching Silver arrive at the docking airlock near the back of the cargo bay. She sat on one of the crates, swinging her legs back and forth while waiting for the airlock to open. The doors opened after what felt like an eternity, and seven wolf-like bipeds strode onto the ship, each brightly feathered in shades of red and yellow.

Kafka let out a gasp. The pirates were *Astrax*, all of them. These were the rarest and deadliest species known to the Federation, and seven of them just boarded Silver's freighter. Their massive, muscular bodies dwarfed Silver's comparatively tiny frame, and the patchwork metal plate armor covering their chests bore numerous scars. Each pirate held a battered laser rifle in their hands. Even Silver must have been surprised, based on her delayed reaction in standing up to greet her unwanted guests. The display had no audio, but Kafka still chittered nervously as he watched her speak to them. After a few moments, the largest Astrax pointed his rifle at her. Silver put her hands up slowly, her confident demeanor wiped from her face.

Kafka nervously watched them talk for a moment until the largest Astrax laughed and raised his rifle to her forehead. Seeing that, Kafka couldn't take it anymore. He didn't know what overcame him, but he steeled both his wings and bolted out of the escape pod, ignoring his fellow crewmember's cries of protest.

I have to do something! I can't let my captain die! Kafka thought to himself as he skittered down the ship's maze of hallways as fast as he could. It was only when he reached the cargo bay's internal airlock that he remembered he had no plan. Left with few options, he crouched down and opened the airlock a crack, peeking inside.

"... could you at least leave me two crates? So I can tell my boss I fought valiantly to defend the goods, and barely shook you off?" said Silver, who still had a gun to her head. The Astrax before her lowered his gun and threw back his snout in laughter. Kafka winced when he saw the rows of razor-sharp teeth that lined his mouth.

"This one's got guts! I like her!" said the Astrax between breaths. He motioned to two of the pirates who were busy attaching hover-pads to the crates and loading them into their ship. "Hey, leave this here girl two crates. She'll need them, once we cut off her power and air!"

The band of pirates chuckled to themselves, and Kafka couldn't suppress his displeasure wing any longer. He jumped as he heard the wall beep beside him, and could only turn in horror as he saw his wing repeatedly striking the airlock control panel.

With a sudden mechanical whir, the airlock Kafka was hiding behind opened. The Astrax captain reflexively fired a single shot at the door, and it took everything Kafka had to pull back before the energy beam struck the floor where he had been standing just a moment ago.

"Now now, I'm sorry about that, mister crewmember." said the Astrax captain in a gravelly voice. "I really didn't mean to fire at ya, I was just surprised, you see?"

Kafka wasn't fooled by the obvious malice in his voice.

"Now, if you would just walk out here all nice and slow, I'll give your captain a chance to explain why you're sneakin' around when she told us all the crew already left on a pod."

Despite his fear, he still refused to abandon his captain, so he walked into the cargo bay slowly. He winced when he saw Silver's glare fall upon him. "Now, that was nice an' easy, wasn't it -" the pirate captain was cut off by Silver, who spoke with an almost robotic calmness.

"Kafka, what did I tell you before?" He began to melt under her reproachful gaze, but nonetheless mustered up all the courage he could to reply.

"To... go to the airlock?" he said with a squeak.

Silver shook her head. "No, I distinctly remember telling you to arm the detonator charges on the ship's engines *before*coming to cause a distraction. Did you do either of those things?" At that, the pirates began to whisper nervously among themselves.

"Hey, what do you mean -" The Astrax captain's surprised exclamation was cut off again.

"I know you didn't get it done, Kafka. I'll cover you, so *go do your damn job!*" Without so much as a word of warning, Silver grabbed the captain's arm and twisted it as she lunged towards him, vaulting him around her shoulder in a show of strength uncharacteristic of her small body. Without losing momentum, She rolled backwards behind one of the cargo containers suspended by hover-pads, pulling out a miniscule pistol from underneath it. Kafka could only stare slack-mandibled at her for a few moments before coming to his senses and running for his life. Several laser blasts followed him, but none of them landed their mark.

Arm the detonators? What could she mean!? Kafka couldn't comprehend Silver's instructions. However, as he neared the engine room, he once again recalled the instructions his captain had given him on his first day on the ship.

"*First, run to the Escape Pod. Second, ignore anything I tell you to do during the emergency*", she had said. He stood frozen, agonizing over the realization - that Silver had told him to leave so he could escape with the rest of the crew without giving the pirates a chance to know about the escape pod, which was probably still docked at the ship. Not only that, but she had willingly started a fight with the most dangerous species in the galaxy to give him a chance to escape. He felt a myriad of emotions well up inside him, but he shook them off, determined not to let her sacrifice go in vain. Without a second thought, he took off towards the escape pod.

The rest of the crew shot him angry looks as he climbed back inside the cramped pod. Only Biv expressed any worry. "Kafka, are you alright?" he asked with only a hint of anger.

Kafka could only shrink down in his seat further. The entire crew remained silent as they took off, switching the monitor's feed to the pod's external camera. Kafka felt like he could sense the crew's animosity towards him - if he had just stayed put, Silver probably could have talked her way out of it.

"I killed her." he whispered to himself, shivering at the realization.

At that moment, any hope Kafka may have had left for Silver was vaporized along with the ship he had just escaped from. Silver's freight cruiser exploded in a massive inferno, taking the pirate's ship with it. The crew remained dead silent as they saw the blaze consume both ships. As if to crown the dark, fiery rhapsody before him, Kafka witnessed the main engine drift away just

before the charred husk of a ship's subspace drive collapsed, ripping apart the wreckage into atoms. Kafka could only think dark thoughts as he sunk deeper into shame and sadness.

It was several hours of tense silence before the escape pod landed at the Federation star base. Kafka agonized for what felt like hours as he waited for the emergency responders to open the hatch. When it finally did open, Kafka saw a ghost. It was Silver, unharmed aside from a few minor burns. She helped the crew out of the pod one by one, each of them exchanging a quiet word of celebration with her before leaving. Kafka could only stare in shock.

"Why so glum, Kafka?" she said with a smile once she had helped the last person leave. "Captain, I-" Kafka tried to speak, but was cut short as his legs gave out and he hit the floor. Silver jumped into the escape pod to help him up. As they left the pod, Kafka could only muster the strength to hoarsely ask, "How?"

Kafka's question was answered as soon as he left the pod. Crashed next to the landing pad was the ship's engine, or at least what remained of it. He could clearly see an airlock haphazardly hacked onto the side of the engine. It hung open at an odd angle, exposing the former engine's hollow interior, which contained a single pilot's seat and control terminal. "Yeah, I know I told you it's not like the serials. What can I say? It seemed like a good contingency plan." said Silver when she noticed him gawking at the horribly improvised escape craft. They stood in silence for a few seconds before Silver spoke again.

"Thanks for following orders, Kafka. You did good."

Kafka's attention was suddenly torn away by a loud thud from behind him. He turned around to see Biv, who had just slid a crate of cargo out of the escape pod.

"C-The cargo! But, I didn't see..." Kafka stood slack-mandibled as realization after realization hit him. Silver had stored as much cargo as she could in the escape pod in perfect anticipation of an attack. That was why it was so cramped, the pod wasn't non-regulation, it was just filled to the brim! The sheer audacity of the plan boggled Kafka's mind. He could only watch in awe as Silver left him to help the rest of the crew retrieve the cargo as if it were just another routine shipment.